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READABILITY OF OFFICE MEMORANDA

I. Introduction

This study describes certain organizational and format features which make memoranda easier to read. It is designed to assist CIA staff members in the preparation of readable memoranda by expressing the reader's point of view. It conforms in format to the principles it sets forth.

II. Importance of Organization

Most people can read reasonably legible print at rates of several thousand words per minute. Even cable material can be accurately scanned at 1,000 words per minute, while 500 words per minute is a rapid rate for thorough understanding of clearly printed written information.

Poor organization of ideas retards reading rate much more than such factors as size of print, line length, and spacing. The reader can understand a well-organized document with poor print more readily than a poorly-organized, well-printed document.

To be well organized, a typewritten manuscript must have a clearly stated purpose, with an amount of background information suitable to the purpose and reader. Facts, evidence, and opinions are arranged in an orderly pattern, for example: time-sequence, problem-solution, cause-effect, or opinion-reasons. Sentences and paragraphs are short, simple, and direct. Vocabulary is simple, and technical jargon is avoided. Conclusions are explicitly formulated.

III. Effect of Format on Readability

Format must be judiciously adapted to organization and subject matter. Important sections are

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blackened by overtyping, or underscored, and subtitles indicate logical thought units. Paragraphs are separated by spacing, and indented at least two spaces. The manuscript may be single-spaced, with black type of medium boldness on white paper. Evidence suggests that lines should be 3 to 4 inches long, although the best line length for typewritten print is not definitely established.

American typewriter print is one of the least readable type faces. Since small variations in other type faces do not affect readability, it is unlikely that there are significant differences among the different kinds of typewriters. Some of the format characteristics which affect readability of typewritten material are:

1. Emphasis. Blackening important sections by overtyping, or stressing the words which would be emphasized in oral reading by capitalization or underscoring can increase reading rate.

2. Subtitles and paragraphs. Logically arranged or numbered subtitles help the reader in surveying his reading task. Further breakdown of thoughts by paragraphing is also an aid.

3. Length of line. The feasibility of preparing all typewritten memoranda in lines no longer than 4 inches should be considered.

The best line length varies for different print faces, but it is around 88 millimeters, or $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Typewritten matter presented in two columns is definitely more readable than that in long lines. Very short lines decrease the usefulness of peripheral vision, and excessively long lines increase the frequency of eye pauses and regressions.

The line length in this memorandum is shortened to approximately 4 inches. The original draft was typed in the usual line length of 6 inches. It was approximately 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ pages, and shortening the lines produced 3 pages in the final form.

In any case, typewritten material should always be prepared with very wide margins.

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4. Paragraph spacing and indentation. Paragraph indentation and spacing between paragraphs increase reading rate substantially by separating thought units. Research indicates that reading ease is increased by indentation, but no evidence is available as to the best amount of indentation for typewriter print.

Paragraph numbering facilitates cross reference, but there is no evidence that it increases reading rate or comprehension.

5. Line spacing. Single-spaced manuscripts appear to be as easily read as double-spaced manuscripts.

One group of Agency employees read a single-spaced test at an average rate of 267 words per minute and answered 13 of 20 questions correctly. A comparable group read the same selection in double-spaced form at an average rate of 275 words per minute and answered 13 of 20 questions correctly. The difference of 8 words per minute is very small.

6. Boldness. Type "boldness" refers to both its heaviness and its darkness. Neither very bold nor very light type is as readable as type of medium boldness. Medium typewriter ribbons should be used, rather than heavy or light ribbons.

7. Color schemes. Black print on white or cream paper is the most readable color combination, because it provides maximum contrast.

IV. Conclusions

If writers apply the principles suggested above, memoranda will be more readable.

Further research needs to be done on line length, variations in typewriter print faces, and organizational principles.



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